

An oral history of fishing on south coast estuaries

Report

Dr Paul R. Weaver
Edith Cowan University

Sponsored by
Commonwealth National Fishcare Program, Fisheries WA and the Western Australian
Department of Conservation and Land Management

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August 1998

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1. Executive summary

An oral history of fishing on south coast estuaries can be reviewed at three levels, firstly in this brief executive summary, secondly in a more detailed account in the main report, and thirdly through the transcripts, each having a description of contents set out in point format.

The project was conducted through 1997-98 under the sponsorship of CALM, Fisheries WA and the National Fishcare Program. Its intent was to identify and record interviews with people who have related to south coast estuaries over time. In response to publicity, 26 interviewees participated, comprising 23 men and 3 women. Two persons described themselves as recreational fishers, the remainder having a professional fishing connection.

An interview guide which is described in detail elsewhere in the main report enabled the interviews to be conducted in a focussed format in order to generate information of interest to the sponsoring agencies. It was not expected that interviewees would be able to provide information about all of the matters in the guide. Sometimes fishers were knowledgeable about unexpected matters and they were encouraged to elaborate on them because of the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of how people related to the fishery and associated resources.

The interview guide identified the following as matters of primary interest: Initial involvement with the research region? How fishing skills were acquired? Target fish species? Changes to catch rates? Perceptions of environmental change? Seasonal considerations related to fishing? Reasons for moves to alternative fishing grounds? Perceived changes or threats to customary usage over time? Religious and customary beliefs which influence fishing? Matters of secondary interest are listed in the research guide and discussed in the main report.

1.1 Peoples' early involvement with the region

Many estuary fishers along the south coast are descended from fishermen who arrived at the end of the nineteenth century. Several families trace their fishing origins to Victoria, their forebears having arrived in Albany in search of better fishing opportunities. Some of these early fishers had large families, and partnerships comprising brothers and older sons particularly appear to have assisted success. These groups also brought their nets and boats from Victoria, and in the case of one family, a nineteenth century boat is still in commercial use on Princess Royal Harbour. The expanding southwest rail network enabled some of these fishing families to extend their operations westward from Albany, and they supplied fish to Perth and the goldfields. Other families at Albany specialised their operations on Oyster or Princess Royal Harbours, and by mutual agreement have maintained the tradition through to the present.

Another identifiable group of fishers came in search of better prospects from Mandurah on the west coast, and eventually became permanently involved with Wilson's and Hardy Inlets. During the early half of the twentieth century Mandurah fishers were undertaking expeditions to estuaries east of Albany, particularly seeking as much black bream and mullet as they could catch. Declining catches on the Peel-Hardy Inlet and large numbers of fishermen there were cited as reasons for these extensive expeditions.

1.2 Acquisition of fishing skills

Most persons traced their fishing skills to their fathers or uncles and had been involved in some form of fishing activity since early childhood. Several male interviewees had been licensed professional fishers since their early teens. Older Albany based fishermen have

generally depended on fishing entirely for their living. Some diversification takes place amongst younger fishers. At Wilson's Inlet several professional fishers also had small-scale agricultural interests, with fishing being their main economic activity. Successive generations in some families have fished at Wilson's Inlet since the early twentieth century and those today attribute this accumulated experience as very important to their understanding the ecology of the estuarine system. Some families have made positive contributions to fishery research programs over several decades, and in one case since the 1930s.

During the latter half of the twentieth century most estuary fishers along the entire south coast have had some form of seasonal involvement with migratory salmon schools on the south coast beaches. Sometimes these activities have been in informal partnership with other estuary fishing families.

1.3 Target fish species

King George whiting has been a long-time favourite species because it has always commanded a high market price in comparison to others. At Wilson's Inlet the cobbler, garfish and snapper were seasonally significant species. In the estuaries east of Albany, black bream were favourites. At Hardy Inlet the main fish was yellow fin whiting. At Oyster Harbour and Princess Royal Harbour, leatherjackets have long provided a reliable source of income. With the exception of the often landlocked estuaries east of Albany where black bream predominate, all these and several other fish regularly feature in estuary catches however, King George whiting are rarely taken by professionals at Hardy Inlet. Most have always brought some form of return at auction and therefore were always sent off. The only limiting factor in the past being regulatory size constraints and the rare case of total rejection at auction, which would confront the fisherman with a deficit.

Consumer preference has meant that some species have traditionally been targeted more than others and in some cases, as for example with mullet, consumer preferences have changed, and therefore the incentive to catch them has declined. However, due to taste, mullet has undoubtedly been, and remains one of the favourite eating fish amongst professional fishers in the region.

1.4 Changes to catch rates

Estuary fishing takes place throughout the year, with seasonal changes influencing fish behaviour and availability. Clearly estuarine fishers have developed an intimate understanding of such factors over time. Since the early twentieth century fish populations have fluctuated over longer periods in various south coast estuaries. In some years certain species were prolific and not others. The reasons why were less apparent, but it was generally accepted that fish populations did not stay at the same levels anywhere year after year. Recovery usually took place, but it was unpredictable. Several persons remarked that 1998 was possibly the best year in memory at Wilson's Inlet for King George whiting; and crabs, the despised destroyers of set-nets.

At Oyster Harbour various types of shark were prolific during the first half of the twentieth century, but since WW2 there has been a noticeable decline. This may have coincided with the development of the shark fishing industry, which one Bunbury fisher who visited the south coast said had its origins with local fishers filling orders for resident American forces during the war.

1.5 Environmental changes

Most fishers could cite some form of human activity which in the past had a detrimental effect on estuarine fisheries. Several lamented a disastrous attempt by authorities at flood-level control on Culham Inlet which accidentally drained millions of bream into the ocean. Industrial pollution of Princess Royal Harbour was another limiting event, although some recovery has

taken place. Eutrophication and silting has been of concern at Wilson's and Hardy Inlets, and over time there have been noticeable changes to seagrass beds, and the species dependent upon them. At Wilson's there has been a long-running argument as to the best place to annually broach the estuary's sand bar, which is necessary because some of the local infrastructure is below the natural flood level.

Fishers interviewed favoured an eastern opening which allows a significantly greater recharging of ocean water throughout the estuary. There is apparently a politically influential business-led lobby in Denmark which favours a less dynamic opening on the western side because this is supposedly more attractive for tourists. None of these persons volunteered for the study. One interviewee, a farmer and professional fisher on Wilson's Inlet who favours the eastern opening has been conspicuous in promoting pioneer agricultural programs to reduce eutrophication from the catchment area.

At Hardy Inlet there was concern about environmental damage to fishing grounds. One interviewee felt that forestry practices upstream had been one significant factor in reducing the viability of black bream, he also felt that professional netting methods had contributed to their demise, and that a closed season on the species for amateur fishers was ineffective because it was unsynchronised with the spawning season.

Dredging programs in response to the demands of tourist operators have in the past, and are still continuing to take place in the estuary and have been unsympathetic with the local knowledge of professional fishermen. As at Wilson's Inlet, there was a feeling amongst fishers that upper-level management decisions in have too often been made in pursuit of short term political gain, rather than in the interest of optimising the ecological health of the estuary. There was a general feeling that more sincere consultation could alleviate unwise planning decisions. Another matter which emerged in several interviews was a perception that scientific research on estuaries lacked continuity, and that sometimes there was insufficient or negligible feedback to the community about the results of past research.

1.6 Religious and customary views

A Blessing of the Fleet ceremony is annually held at Albany and had a degree of appeal for fishers with Catholic or southern European links. Male fishers not from these backgrounds were disinclined to admit to any religious approach to their activities and regarded the ceremony with skepticism. Nevertheless, a few grudgingly admitted to having an affinity with the beautiful estuaries they had spent their lives upon. Female fishers tended to have a greater self-awareness about such matters.

Some long-time professional and recreational fishers have regarded certain areas as their own precinct, and this generally seems to have been respected by others for as long as those persons actively fished. Such views tended to be highly localised and related to waters adjacent to the fisher's private dwelling.

1.7 Limitations and value of the study

While relevant southwest Aboriginal organisations were canvassed with advance publicity, no Aborigines formally took part in the study. This is regretted. One anonymous family did participate informally and this is discussed specifically at the end of the main report.

The enthusiastic response from professional fishers was pleasing, and their contributions should be of considerable interest to future researchers. Undoubtedly there will be others who would have been worthy of inclusion, but they were not identified. The opportunity exists for an ongoing program of interviews with this group.

The response from recreational fishers was very low even though all the major representative bodies were canvassed and the study was specifically mentioned in leading fishing magazines, newspaper fishing sections and regional radio stations of the ABC. As to why there was so little reaction from that sector is unclear, but it may be related to the study specifically dealing with estuarine fisheries.

Nevertheless, the interviews which have been obtained are of good quality and usefully

raise matters for future management consideration. Undoubtedly there is a genuine willingness within the knowledgeable group of people interviewed to be consulted to a greater degree in fisheries and environmental management matters.

It seems apparent too from the many interviews gathered that an opportunity exists for educators to develop and deliver a more comprehensive program to the general community about the complexity of the biota, and the differing environmental dynamics in the south coast estuaries.

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Contents

1. Project summary	3
2. Project objectives	3
3. The study region	3
4. Project design	4
5. The interview guide	4
6. Other priorities	5
7. Analysis of interviews	5
8. Technicalities	6
9. Ethical matters	6
10. Publicity for the project	6
11. The participants	8
12. Discussion of the interviews	9
13. Aboriginal estuarine fishers	22
14. References	24
15a. Appendix - Initial survey form	25
15b. Appendix - Consent form,	26
16. Transcripts cover page	27

1. Project summary

In August 1997 I was requested by Edith Cowan University to design and undertake an oral history of estuary fishing on the south coast of Western Australia, east of Cape Leeuwin. At the same time, I was asked to undertake a similar project for Ningaloo Reef, which is located south of Northwest Cape, near Exmouth. Both projects were sponsored by grants and assistance-in-kind from The National Fishcare Program, the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management, The Western Australian Fisheries Department, (now Fisheries WA) and Edith Cowan University, the latter being responsible for management of all grant funds.

After a series of initial meetings with CALM and WAFD a methodology was designed which met the requirements of these organisations and the university's ethical standards. Publicity for the projects commenced in late September 1997, with the first round of interviews taking place after the Christmas-break in late January 1998. A second round of interviews took place in mid February and a third in mid-March. Transcribing of the interviews subsequently took place and was mostly completed by the end of July, however one late interview was conducted on 5 August. The overall process resulted in 26 interviews involving south coast estuaries and 16 for Ningaloo.

In the original proposal it was anticipated that the final report would be submitted on 1 June 1998. Subsequent consideration of clause 1 (p.3) and section 9.3 (p.10) of the Deed of Agreement prepared by the Commonwealth of Australia and Edith Cowan University indicated this date should have been 28 August.

I believe the results of both projects can be regarded as successful. All the objectives were met, and the material gathered is of a high standard which will be of ongoing use to others in the future. I thank the sponsoring agencies for the opportunity to undertake the projects. At the same time I would like to emphasise that these histories should not be regarded as the last word for the regions. Undoubtedly there will be other persons who would have been worthy of inclusion, and hopefully they will participate in a future project.

2. Project objectives

- a. To identify persons who had a long standing knowledge of fishing activity with the respective region and to record their recollections.
- b. To develop and refine a methodology appropriate for the compilation of an oral history.

It was hoped that the experience and observations of people interviewed would contribute to a better understanding of human interaction with the fishery in the past, and that this would contribute to the objectives of the State and National Fishcare Programs; namely to enable management of Australia's fisheries on a sustainable, more productive level, to encourage greater community awareness of the need for protecting and restoring fish habitats, and to involve the community with integrated approaches to natural resources management and conservation.

The outcome of each project would be a report outlining the manner in which it was conducted, along with a discussion of the findings. The reports, intended for public dissemination, would be presented to the joint sponsors of the projects, the Commonwealth National Fishcare Program, the Fisheries Department of Western Australia (FDWA) and the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) after mid-1998.

3. The study region

The study region covered by this report involves estuaries along the south coast of Western Australia, eastward of Cape Leeuwin.

4. Project design

Prospective interviewees were to be canvassed through media publicity, and through communication with officers from sponsoring agencies. Relevant organisations such as fishing clubs, environmental associations, Aboriginal associations and regional history groups were also to be circularised. Those people who did respond were initially requested to provide basic information about themselves and their relationship with the fishery on a form (copy attached to this report) and return it 'reply paid' to the researcher's home address. The form had two purposes, firstly to enable cluster scheduling of interviews, and secondly if necessary to enable filtering of the number of respondents to a manageable sample. It was estimated that due to available funding, there was unlikely to be more than 25 interviewees selected for each region. In fact most people who made contact were interviewed. Two persons subsequently became unavailable for an interview because of changes in personal circumstances. All interviews have been transcribed. A copy of these and the recordings will be placed with the oral history collection at the Battye Library.

Interviews were intended to have a focussed format, which was facilitated by the advance compilation of an 'interview guide' which is reproduced below. It was expected that field notes pertaining to each interview would be compiled immediately after the interview and provide an indication of content. In reality the compilation of highly detailed additional field notes after each interview proved impractical in a number of cases because of the close scheduling of interviews. In addition the focussed nature of the interviews meant that in most cases they would be relatively easy to diagnose as the transcripts were typed. Most interviewees were able to address the objectives of the interview guide in slightly less than an hour, and all were given the opportunity to include any other information on the record which they thought relevant. In some cases interviews lasted much longer than an hour when usable information was forthcoming. All interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis.

5. The interview guide

It was understood from preliminary meetings that CALM had an interest in learning of peoples' perceptions about environmental change and their relationships to the environment, and that FDWA were interested in information relating to adjusted catch efforts and actual results over time. These were in accordance with the aims of the State and National Fishcare Programs. The list constructed below acted as a guide to the interview. This was not shown to the interviewees in advance, although they could have viewed it had they wished. It was realised not all of the subject material listed would be obtainable from all interviewees, and that they might wish to occasionally elucidate upon subjects of relevance not necessarily covered by the guide. Importantly, it was emphasised to all interviewees that there were no right or wrong answers. What particularly mattered were their own personal views:

Of primary interest

- How why and when individual became involved with the research region.
- How fishing skills were acquired.
- Target fish species.
- Perceptions of environmental change.
- Changes to catch rates - reasons. Moves to alternative fishing grounds - reasons?
- Religious and customary beliefs which influence fishing.
- Perceived changes or threats to customary usage over time.
- Seasonal considerations related to fishing.

Of secondary interest

- Perceived health matters related to fishing activities.
- Social aspects relating to own and other fishing families through fishing.

Working conditions, dangers and lucky escapes while fishing.
Perceived relationship of individual to the aquatic environment.
Influence of fishing literature on fishing decisions.
Real or perceived economic returns from fishing.
Technology - Boat design and other fishing equipment - adaptations.
Navigation methods utilised in fishing.

6. Other priorities

A photograph of the interviewee was to be taken with their permission for inclusion with the transcript. In addition, and also with their permission, relevant historical photographs would be copied in situ for similar inclusion. If interviewees were in possession of old diaries, logs etcetera relating to fishing a request would be made to examine these, with particular emphasis to be placed on the historical value in preserving such documents. Generally, most interviewees did not maintain any personal historical records of fishing. Professional fishermen's records tended for the most part to relate to copies of obligatory catch returns on FDWA stationary.

Similarly, while there was plenty of oral accounts about fishing activities of ancestors, little in the way of substantive material evidence about those earlier activities was sighted. Some people did have small collections of early fishing photographs, and some of these have been reproduced with the transcripts. However, most old images viewed were not well identified, and it was emphasised to all the owners of the benefits of attempting to further address this.

Photographic media utilised was 35mm black and white film for copying photographs, and 35mm print film and slides for other purposes. In hindsight, a Polaroid camera would have been the most useful medium for taking portraits of interviewees.

7. Analysis of interviews

There are differing ways of considering the value of anecdotal statements presented in oral history interviews. Certainly distortion and embellishment can serve to obscure matters of fact which are not generally recognised. Nevertheless as a social document such interviews can stand alone and have substantial value because they provide a unique insight into how individuals perceive and exploit the environment, its species and any management initiatives. Such statements are made in the context of that person's own experience, which is for them the relevant truth. The various interviews were analysed for common perceptions and beliefs, and a determination attempted as to how well they concurred with each other. In addition there was scrutiny for matters of significance not previously recognised. While this report provides a summary of material gathered, the true value of the project remains in the words of the interviewees, and other researchers should take the time to read them. Points of interest for each interview are located on the first page of the transcript. It is quite possible that many of these subjects can be explored in greater depth with these people in the future, and others are encouraged to take up the challenge.

There was a shared belief amongst several interviewees that fish stocks have declined and there is a need for effective management plans to be adopted in the interests of the resources. Management organisations did not receive serious criticism, but there is a fairly common perception that decisions in the past have too often been based upon political expediency.

What is clear is that while curiosity exists with most interviewees about the natural history of species and the environment, there is a capacity for improvement in some fundamental matters. There is an opportunity for some agency to develop more informative education programs directed at adults, whom after all, are the main exploiters of fisheries. Other matters raised by interviewees are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this report.

8. Technicalities

It was initially suggested that three hours of transcription time would be required for each hour of interview time. In fact this was a significant underestimation. Transcriptions were all typed by myself and the time to do each depended on the manner in which answers were given. When interviewees provided long answers and explanations, the transcribing time was reduced significantly, but nowhere near three hours. Short answers took much longer. Generally the overall time for a one hour interview could take eight hours although in practical terms this could extend over one to two working days because of the fatigue factor. Hesitations, and inadvertent speech mannerisms by the interviewee and interviewer are usually represented by a dash -.

Undoubtedly a trained transcription typist could have performed the task much faster, and this avenue was considered. However, there was some concern about accuracy with specialised terminology, indistinct words and confidential or potentially sensitive material. In addition, and in the interests of providing as accurate a record as possible, I particularly wanted to preserve colloquialisms verbatim, and this too takes much longer than imposing an edited, more free flowing text which would inevitably emerge from a typist not familiar with the subjects.

Interviews were recorded on ordinary Akai C60 cassettes, and transcriptions typed up on a Macintosh Performer 5260/120. The word-processing software was MacWrite Pro. A Dictaphone Voice Processor with foot pedal was used for playback. Images were scanned on Macintosh 1200/30 Color One Scanner. The printer was a Personal LaserWriter LS. Text on the transcripts and report is 10 point Times. The report is 12 point Times. The main source for determining scientific names of fish was a field guide *The Marine and Estuarine Fishes of South-western Australia*, by Barry Hutchins and Martin Thompson, published in 1983 by the Western Australian Museum.

9. Ethical matters

In the design of the project I was guided by the ethics policy of Edith Cowan University. The project could not proceed until approval of a specific research proposal was forthcoming from the University's Ethics Council. Importantly all interviews were conducted on the basis of informed consent. The objectives and foreseeable outcomes of the project were explained as fully as possible prior to interviews. Formal consent of the interviewee was required though a signed 'form of release'. (Copy attached). This form was based on a model published by the Oral History Association of Australia. The copyright of content of the recordings was to be retained jointly by the interviewee and the interviewer. Furthermore, all informants were advised that they had the right to anonymity, and at any time during the course of the project they could withdraw, delete or restrict any information they might provide. As it turned out, no interviewees exercised this option. However, some material has been expunged from transcripts when names of third parties or past activities were mentioned in a potentially embarrassing context. These points are marked on the transcripts.

10. Publicity for the project

From the outset it was assumed that prospective interviewees might be widespread, therefore publicity of the project would need to be statewide. For practical reasons it was decided to design advance material to include both projects, and that if possible, most publicity would be generated with a minimal financial outlay. Initially a mailout of information took place to organisations or businesses. These included:

- Local history groups.
- Regional Aboriginal organisations.
- Recreational fishing associations.
- Regional recreational fishing tackle shops.

Regional professional fishermen's associations and cooperatives.
Western Australian recreational and professional fishing publications.
Regional and statewide newspapers.
The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) offices at Karratha and Perth.

As a convenient starting point for other researchers, listings of such organisations can be found in "Yellow Pages" telephone directories, bearing in mind that for large areas such as Western Australia, there are several regional editions. Sponsoring agencies can often provide alternative listings of appropriate organisations. No response for the project was received from any Aboriginal, environmental or recreational fishing organisations.

Media organisations were sent two single-page sheets of information. One describing the projects and one describing the background of myself. The personal information was included in order to provide potential interviewees an image of the person they were being asked to invite to their homes. In particular it was intended that a message be given that the interviews would be conducted in an understanding and non-threatening manner. For them to be open in their discussions, it was felt that first I needed to demonstrate openness. It was an exercise in familiarity and turned out to be a worthwhile strategy. In all cases when potential interviewees or organisations made contact, their response was warm and cooperative.

The information package used the Edith Cowan University letterhead, and invited people to contact me at my residential telephone number and address, the latter with a FreePost number so that no stamp was necessary. FreePost is easily arranged through the nearest sorting post office and a small surcharge is added to the normal cost which would apply to each article. Periodically an account is sent to the destination address. In fact, most initial return contacts for this project came by telephone, with country callers taking advantage of lower evening rates. These calls lasted on average about ten minutes each. A surprising number of people who wrote did not take advantage of the FreePost option. Every initial contact was followed up with a letter of acknowledgement.

The ABC were pleased to arrange publicity interviews with me, and one lasting about ten minutes took place by telephone with a presenter based at Karratha. This was broadcast throughout the northwest of the state, but the first response from a potential interviewee came from a person at Augusta on the south coast, who had also been listening. Further publicity was generated from this interview when it was discussed later during the week in a statewide roundup of regional news conducted by Perth ABC presenter Ted Bull.

A studio interview with me was also conducted in Perth by ABC presenter Peter Holland. Mr Holland is a well respected radio and television identity. The interview ran for about twenty minutes and was broadcast statewide. The first part of this interview was based upon my personal background and again was intended to establish a degree familiarity and relaxed rapport with the listeners, then it concentrated on the aims of the projects. The skill of the ABC presenters enabled both interviews to be conducted smoothly. While I had prepared notes, it was impractical, and unnecessary to refer to these during the interviews.

It is important to remember that background briefing for presenters in such situations often takes place moments before the actual interviews. Appreciation was expressed privately for the concise one page summaries I had provided. Initial responses from Mr Holland's interview came that evening from the south coast, and then there was a week long lapse before more calls came in.

Newspaper articles in both regions based on the press releases were particularly productive. In one case a newspaper took up the invitation to phone me at home and further discuss the projects. Another newspaper did not contact me personally, but did contact some south coast fishermen for their views on the project before publication. A common theme amongst callers was that a history of fishing activity in both regions was well overdue.

11. The participants

Charles K. Benson
Paul Benson
George Challis
Barry Dawes
George Ebbet
Owen McIntosh
Beryl Miller
Warren Miller
Les Mouchemore
Bill North
David Palfrey
Collin Price
Trevor Price
Ron Proctor
Alan Rule
Alf Sharp
Cedric Smith
James (Alf) Smith
Ray Smith
Emanuel Soulos
Nick Soulos
Hugh Strain
Fred Swarbrick
Norm Swarbrick
Derick Tysoe
Pauline Tysoe

12. Discussion of the interviews

The first interview took place in October 1977, however, the bulk took place during two one-week periods in mid January and in early February 1998. Final appointments were made with the interviewees by telephone in the week immediately preceding each of these periods, with persons grouped according to their locations. While it had been anticipated that there would be significant problems in scheduling people, these fears proved unfounded. Aside from considerations related to their working commitments, all interviewees were very cooperative in making themselves available. In addition to those persons who had made advance contact with the project, numerous interviews were undertaken with other local identities on the basis of recommendation and introduction as the interviews proceeded. All those persons were equally willing to participate in the project when approached.

One elderly former professional fisherman in his eighties now resident in a nursing home in Perth twice contacted me via a nurse but eventually decided not to participate. His nurse subsequently informed me that the man had been involved in substantial poaching activities in the past, and in spite of the option for anonymity, he remained fearful of prosecution.

The licensed and formerly-licensed professional fishermen and women of the south coast can be regarded as a wide-spread but identifiable community. Several families have fished the region for many generations, and most know each other. This is not only through encounters in their work activities, but through the membership of the South Coast Professional Fishermen's Association. Social interaction takes place between a few people, but for the most part the relationships are work related. Members of the Association travel quite long distances, sometimes hundreds of kilometres to attend periodic meetings, and a communications network exists via UHF CB radio, and more increasingly by mobile telephone.

Some fishermen operate exclusively on the estuaries, but some also seasonally exploit the migratory runs of fish such as pilchard, herring, whitebait and the Australian salmon.¹ Other families operate small farms in conjunction with their fishing activities.

Several families can trace their fishing activities to the late-nineteenth/early twentieth century when the economic effects of the gold industry facilitated the establishment of a comprehensive rail network throughout the southwest and to the goldfields. Most families originated their fishing activities in Western Australia, but at least two, the Mouchemores of Albany and the Smiths of Denmark had ancestors who previously fished in Victoria before bringing their boats and equipment as deck cargo to the south coast of WA. As the long-time south coast families have developed over time, some now have members operating in the crayfishing fleet off the west coast or the trawler fleets as far away as northern Queensland.

The Peel Inlet at Mandurah was fished by a number of other fishers before they or their descendants finally settled on the south coast. Elderly Augusta fisherman Colin Price had arrived there with his fisherman father in the 1940s and revealed that the highly competitive nature of fishing at Mandurah had been a significant factor influencing their move. Nowadays

¹ *Sardinops neopilchardus*, *Arripis georgianus*, *Hyperlophus vittatus* and *Arripis esper*.

Colin and his son Trevor, who was also interviewed, still fish the Hardy Inlet. Trevor was kind enough to take me out on the water and show me how he operated.

The Hardy Inlet has long been a commercial source of yellow-fin whiting,² and provided a reliable portion of winter income for Emanuel Soulos and his father Nicholas, who were based in Bunbury. According to Emanuel, in his youth, professional fishing in west coast estuaries became untenable during the winter months in the early days because none of the rivers had been dammed. The Soulos family fished throughout the second world war when few fishing regulations were enforced, the overriding priority being to contribute to the war effort. As a result they also ranged as far north as the Murchison River to obtain bony Perth herring³ for a cannery in Perth. Emanuel said that the demand for shark meat by American troops during WW2 marked the beginning of the WA shark fishing industry. Interestingly Fred Swarbrick at Oyster Harbour remarked on huge catches of sharks there in those days, but noted that they are now rare. His brother Norm Swarbrick also commented that sharks were much less prevalent. Indeed Norm thought that all fishing in Oyster Harbour had seriously declined over the years and he directed a good proportion of the blame to noise pollution from outboard motors and jet skis. Emanuel Soulos also mentioned noise pollution as a problem for fishermen.

Remarkable amongst fishermen with a Mandurah connection is the story told by Hugh Strain jnr., now retired at Applecross near Perth. Hugh was born in 1910, at Pinjarra. His father Hugh snr. and his Uncle Tom were fishers at Yunderup on the Peel Inlet and lived in timber houses on the edge of the water near an icehouse. The depression caused Hugh snr. and another fisherman Wally Squires to set off with their two teenage sons, (Hugh jnr. and Gil Squires) to try for fish in the estuaries east of Albany. The Tuckey family, who were prominent fish canners at Mandurah, had suggested this might be successful. The Tuckeys were particularly interested in mullet and had previously made expeditions to Pallinup estuary, then turned their attention to the small estuary at Moore River.

The Strains had a Model T Ford car and made their way over a very rough track to Pallinup. This was fished to depletion, with the fish being taken to the rail sidings at Katanning and Broomehill for dispatch to Perth. Ice was collected from Katanning and taken back to the estuary for the next load. Then the four men moved progressively through the estuaries further eastward mainly catching black bream.⁴ They found that often they were able to get a load from highly saline waterways, the extant fish population often being confined to slightly less salty patches of water adjacent to the bar or upstream.⁵ The group then moved back to Albany, but the families who fished Oyster Harbour made it clear that newcomers were unwelcome. Hugh and his father settled at Wilson's Inlet near Denmark and fished together until Hugh snr. perished in a boating accident. Aside from the tragedy, Hugh's interview reveals how

² *Sillago schomburgkii*.

³ *Nematalosa vlaminghi*.

⁴ *Acanthopagrus butcheri*.

⁵ Bignell (1977: 255) writes that professional fishing activities at Pallinup and Bremer Bay in the 1930s were so effective that the local roads board, pressured by amateur fishers, imposed seasonal restrictions.

innovative early fishermen had to be, and how certain strategies were devised to maximise catches. Hugh carried on in partnership with another lad, but eventually left the industry for surveying.

Many of the fishermen interviewed attained their professional licences at very young ages, and that this trend continued until comparatively recently. A rite of passage in a sense, some of these people were fishing professionally from the age of eight, although the ages of fifteen or sixteen are more frequently cited. In many cases these young men fished with their fathers and grandfathers well before they acquired their licence, and in the case of Kevin Benson, he said he had been put in a tea chest in the foc'sl of a fishing boat the *Crown* at the age of one month. Understandably these men are very proud of their heritage. For some families such as the Bensons the lineage will be ongoing for sometime. Others, such as the Mouchemores have no sons to carry on the family name and are resigned to the fact they will soon no longer be represented amongst south coast fishers.

For others there has been no choice, the changed policy of the fishery regulatory authority is to not recognise an inherent right of descendants to continue the occupation of their forefathers, although many would like to do so. The policy is now to reduce the overall number of estuarine fishermen in a licence buyback scheme. The sons and daughters who would like to continue the family tradition now seek what little work there is, for example in Augusta in distant sawmills, or as kitchenhands in the burgeoning tourist industry. Some too are leaving home to seek better prospects in other regions, and there is a fear they will probably move from the region forever.

Professional estuarine fishing has traditionally been a male occupation, although it is clear that wives have always played a significant role, both in the catching and marketing of fish. Elderly Mavis Smith of Denmark recalled that she had come from a fishing family, the Morffits of Peel Inlet. There, her mother had cured fish by smoking and developed a thriving business sending them through the post to farmers in the wheatbelt. When Mavis came to Denmark as the young bride of Alf Smith she ultimately overcame the trauma of isolation to become an essential partner in her husband's fishing activities. Similarly Pauline Tysoe in Albany has, and continues to play an essential support role in her husband's fishing activities. They also hold the lease on a salmon beach and alternate their activities between there and Oyster Harbour. Salmon fishing was also an essential alternative seasonal activity for the Sharp, Benson and North families.

Owen McIntosh and Warren Miller of Denmark each fish Wilson's Inlet exclusively all year round, contentedly taking cobbler, King George whiting and the occasional crab.⁶ Interestingly, they say that 1998 has been the best year in living memory for King George whiting. George Ebbet, who lives nearby, divided his time fishing this inlet and others further east. He also mentioned that from time to time he has seen mullet and large cobbler with physical imperfections which rendered the fish unmarketable. Alf Sharp said that in the past there had been some problems with fish quality in Wilson's Inlet to the extent he stopped

⁶ *Cnidoglanis macrocephalus*, *Sillaginodes punctatus* and *Portunus pelagicus*.

fishing there, but this has now improved.

It is difficult to imagine a more picturesque setting than is enjoyed by Wilson's Inlet fishers. Magnificent granite outcrops stud parts of the shoreline, and away from the settlement, few people are seen. A varied birdlife, including pelicans abound, and while these and shags provide an annoyance to most fishers, the pelicans in particular serve as excellent waste disposal machines, readily consuming the cut-off cobbler heads, spikes and all, plus all the other associated fish guts. I thank Warren for taking me out on the estuary to see him at work, and his mum Beryl Miller for putting me up for one night. Beryl was a professional fisher on Wilson's Inlet in the past, taking up her licence as her father approached retirement. Those were the days when women could experience difficulty in entering traditional male occupations, not so much from other fishermen, but from the bureaucracy. On this she modestly remarked:

I had to do three years with dad, learning how to fish, and being on the boat for (as an) apprentice, but it took a while to get through the fisheries inspectors in Albany, before they'd give me a licence, and - that's how it came about, and I took it over in 1978.

Interference from birds during fishing activities was mentioned in several interviews. In the past they were regarded as vermin, with shags topping the list because of the large numbers of fish they damaged in the submerged nets. At Oyster Harbour, seals and sharks have traditionally also been a problem because they cause significant damage to nets. Crabs were also disliked because when enmeshed they exercised the ability to chew their way free, leaving enormous holes in the process. Even when caught they have a relatively low value and with their profusion of hooks and spikes take a substantial time to be removed from the net. Generally their nippers come off in the process and the crabs are thus only marketable if the fisherman has developed a local clientele.

In the distant past, before there were significant conservation laws, shags, pelicans and seals could expect little mercy from fishermen, who destroyed them by whatever means was at their disposal. Shooting was one method, but poisoning was more effective, either with strychnine or cyanide. The favoured method being to lace small fish with the poison and attach them to the nets. Seals too could expect an unwelcome reception in the form of the full force of a shotgun, or at the least, as one fisherman said, 'a bonk on the head with an oar.' These however, were events of the past, and it seems that there is now a genuine awareness amongst estuary fishermen that one of the best strategies to combat such predations is to get the nets in early and if necessary have a faithful companion in the form of a dog, especially one that yaps a bit at the right time, and which likes to swim.

Few fishermen interviewed have experienced dangerous incidents on the estuaries, tending to regard them as safe places. Nevertheless, there have been some fatalities. Hugh Strain related the tragic example from the 1930s of how his father perished on Wilson's Inlet after their overladen boat was swamped, and Bill North sadly recalled how his father, a one-armed fisherman who without complaint had maintained a large family throughout his life, was

drowned in the closed waters of Torbay Inlet in his eighties. Retired dairy farmer and amateur fisherman Ron Proctor related too how his uncle, a professional fisherman on Wilson's Inlet had died from a head injury in a boating accident in the 1920s. This tragedy led to Ron's father Ed entering the industry when he inherited his unfortunate brother's boat and nets. Two suicides were reported by other estuary fishermen involving their peers, both reports emerging after the recorded interviews. In one case a young Augusta man took his life after being jilted, and the other, a man in the same town who was allegedly financially ruined by severe penalties following Fisheries Department convictions involving marine species. Kevin Benson briefly recounted in his interview three other fishing tragedies near Albany. He felt that these sort of matters tended to draw the fishing community closer together.

The main danger for south coast estuary fishermen appears to have been lacerations from cobblers. People react differently to these painful wounds, and the standard remedy along the south coast amongst the professionals was to bleed the wound then dip it in petrol. In Fremantle in the 1960s the basic first aid treatment was to urinate on the wound, but this appears not to have come into vogue anywhere on the south coast. Two interviewees also reported that similarly painful wounds could be obtained from devil fish⁷ in Princess Royal Harbour. David Palfrey, a relatively young but successful fishermen with a variety of business interests in Albany, found one way to overcome these troublesome small fish was to use a larger net size than the minimum requirement.

Princess Royal Harbour has an estuarine-like environment, and in the old days fishers such as the Mouchemores had an unwritten agreement with the Swarbricks who fished Oyster Harbour that neither family would encroach on the other's grounds. Fred Swarbrick and Les Mouchemore are both now in their sprightly eighties, and living with their wives in Albany. True elders of the Western Australian fishing industry, they have seen a great many others come and go. It would seem the relative specialisation of these families has imparted a beneficial certainty to their lives. One of the Mouchemores original 19th century fishing boats *Wildflower* is still in use by a member of the family, and a picture of this in Princess Royal Harbour is with Les's transcript. The Mouchemores have for a long time also been in an informal partnership with the Benson family in relation to a salmon beach.

The Swarbricks and Mouchemores have been interviewed by other historians from time to time. Matters specifically relating to their families's boats in the past can be read in Garry Kerr's 1985 oral history relating to Australian fishing boats and builders.⁸

Back injuries were a common health problem amongst many men interviewed, and this is not surprising because the work is traditionally very hard. Lifting large heavy crates of fish, blocks of ice and items such as outboard motors in unsafe ways seems as prevalent today as it probably was in the past. One man reported after his interview that he has had two surgical operations on his hands to relieve the pain of repetitive strain injury caused through filleting fish. Adopted as a measure to add value to the catch, he still spends seven hours or longer each

⁷ *Gymnapistes marmoratus*.

⁸ Kerr, G. (1985). *Craft and craftsmen of Australian fishing 1875-1970: An illustrated oral history*. Mains'l Books.

day filleting.

There is another type of estuarine fisherman who for want of a better description might be termed a coastal gypsy because of the practice of visiting most if not all of the estuaries open to fishermen east of Cape Leeuwin. In much the same manner as described by Hugh Strain for the 1930s, the practices continue through to the present. These fishers take careful note of conditions which might enhance their catch size. For example if there is unusual rain in those waterways in the more arid regions to the east, then certain types of fish may aggregate towards the mouths in anticipation of a bar opening, similarly when there is a bar opening, after an appropriate period the prospects for a good catch might be enhanced. Such activities, while legal, do not necessarily meet with peer approval. One elderly estuary fisher, when asked the advantages of such methods, said they were "intended to take the cream." This may well be the case, because after all, the primary role of a professional fisherman is to catch fish and make money. David Palfrey in his younger days had explored the fishing prospects of many shallow and little known waterways along the south coast, but has since also recognised the benefits of specialisation, and now concentrates his fishing efforts on Princess Royal Harbour. David has other business interests, but for him fishing remains a special part of his life with an intrinsic value he hopes will be appreciated by future generations of fishers in his family.

Paul Benson is a fisher who has also spent a lot of time exploring the estuaries and inlets east of Albany. He has developed a substantial understanding of the sometimes very shallow fish habitats along this part of the coast. His main target species have been the black bream, and like others along the south coast he lamented the loss a few years ago of one of the region's most productive fisheries, Culham Inlet. This estuary had been blocked off to the ocean since the early part of the century, but had developed into a rich habitat for black bream. Water levels were higher than the ocean and causing inconvenience to users of a public roadway near the mouth. A decision by authorities to lower the water level slightly led to some ill-planned works with a bulldozer, with the result that one night the bar breached accidentally and the entire estuary was drained, flushing millions of fish into the ocean. According to Paul, in 1998 there has been no recovery, and he doubts that there ever will be with the engineering works which were subsequently carried out.

Young ambitious fishermen are still emerging on the south coast estuarine fishing scene, and like their predecessors they too are keen to sample the annual harvests in the more obscure waterways, although the future of these practices may be limited. According to Alan Rule, the youngest person interviewed, he has been told by a fisheries inspector that this type of fishing cannot continue.

Just as the Mouchemores and Swarbricks had reached agreements with each other on fishing grounds, so too did others in the past exert local, but unofficial rights. Colin Price at Augusta related how fishermen there in the past respected the territoriality of others who fished Hardy Inlet. Customary rights over specific areas appear usually to have been adjacent to the place of abode of those exerting them. This happened at Augusta with George "Pud" Challis, and was observed by other fishermen until George went into semi-retirement a few years ago.

George relates in his interview an amusing incident of how he repeatedly pulled a surveyor's markers out on the estuary until he had a bureaucratic "big stick" waved at him.

Cedric Smith's grandfather and three brothers pioneered fishing in Wilson's Inlet at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Cedric, newcomers while not exactly receiving a hostile reception, could not expect a particularly welcome one either when it came to divulging fishing secrets. Cedric related an amusing tale of how on one occasion his father had returned from a barren part of the estuary with his boat ballasted down with rocks and rowed slowly past some newcomers so that they would be tricked into thinking there were plenty of fish in the direction he had come from. Interestingly Cedric's brother Alf said that their father was a little too free with information provided to newcomers. Conversely, Hugh Strain humorously related how in the 1930s he and his father had devised some successful strategies for setting nets, and that this generated some intensive scrutiny by the Smiths. Unwritten rules also existed about when it was permissible to shoot a net in the proximity of other boats, and these subsequently formed the basis of official regulations intended to reinforce the same effect. Kevin Benson said that in the past, matters could become occasionally heated however, places such as Jurien Bay on the west coast had been much worse.

Occasionally there have been quite violent encounters, and several interviewees spoke on and off the record of a shooting incident at Wilson's Inlet a few years ago. No one was injured, and the common perception was that marijuana and alcohol were involved with the person doing the shooting. It was alleged the police failed to act on a complaint and the fishermen who was shot at subsequently left the industry. Alf Sharp and Derick Tysoc mentioned that there had been other violent incidents in the past in relation to use of salmon beaches.

Generally fishermen interviewed appear to have been lacking in vices, but one cannot help but feel sorry for a now long departed fishing uncle of Alf Smith who had developed a taste for too much whisky, and presented himself conspicuously to Alf's family when the supply ran out. A substituted bottle filled from the tank of fishnet tan, brewed with the resin of the local redgums finally overcame his demanding thirst, and according to Alf, the following day; or was it two or three, he began to feel much better. Several interviewees described, with minor variations, the long-past processes of tanning cotton nets with redgum collected from local trees.

Competition between professional and amateur (recreational) fishers seems more intensive the closer one gets to Cape Leeuwin. Kevin Benson said there was minimal pressure at Albany, and Alf Sharp said there was not as much pressure as in the past. Alf attributed generally good relationships now to the activities of fishing working groups. Alf said government departments still projected a view that there was considerable conflict, but this was at odds with his experience.

Interestingly, and in spite of this project being widely publicised to all the recreational fishing organisations, radio stations with a statewide coverage and in all the major recreational fishing publications, there has been little input from that sector. An exception was Barry

Dawes, who has owned a house for the past 14 years on Molloy Island near Augusta. Molloy Island is a remarkable environmentally orientated housing development in the Blackwood River which cannot be accessed unless by invitation. Numerous houses sit within heavy jarrah forest, but there are no fences and only essential services are allowed. Barry has seen a number of changes over the years, particularly relating to the population of black bream and silting of the Blackwood River. He too is a member of a fishing working group, which periodically meets in Bunbury.

Another amateur was Ron Proctor of Denmark, Ron comes from a family of professional estuary fishers, but went dairy farming instead. Ron believes that the timing of the seasons are changing. The winters do not seem as prolonged and he is able to make his hay harvests earlier than in the past. Ron relates how excessive catches by amateurs in days gone by, particularly of Australian salmon, created community outrage and sparked a need for catch limits. Now semi-retired, fishing for him on Wilson's Inlet remains an important subsistence and social activity

At a Sydney ceremony in May 1998, Denmark was pronounced Australia's tidiest town, and became cause for much jubilation amongst the townsfolk. Undoubtedly it is a neat rural town with cherished values on one of the nation's most beautiful estuaries, but behind the scenes there has been sometimes bitter community division over the way in which the estuary is managed. Ray Smith said that his environmental views in the past had resulted in his children being bullied at school, and that this eventually played a role in his decision to move his fishing activities to the west coast.

The focus of the ongoing debate is the position of the sandbar opening, which almost annually for many decades has been artificially breached. The bar is wide, and opinion is divided over whether the opening should be on the eastern side, which apparently scours deeper and facilitates a greater tidal recharging of the estuary with ocean water, or on the west where openings have a constricted flow, but are perceived as desirable by town influences because the result is a safer swimming venue for locals, and presumably an added attraction for tourists.

Most fish which are caught in the estuary are recruited in large numbers through the bar openings, often as juveniles. Active amongst professional fishermen who favour the eastern opening has been interviewee Owen Macintosh, a gentle and highly knowledgeable man now in his sixties who has spent a lifetime on the inlet. His interview reveals he has been a leader in environmental conservation issues relating to the well being of the estuary. Owen is well known to many scientists, young and old, who have drawn upon his knowledge and assistance in their various studies. As a long-time Captain in the local voluntary fire brigade he was instrumental in lifting the compulsion on local farmers to annually plough fire-breaks, because they were a significant factor in eutrophication of the estuary. In addition he has regularly made his farm available for agricultural experiments attempting to lower the dependence on phosphates, which also have significant influence on estuarine ecology. On the water he has participated in long term studies with scientists, of various fish species, water temperatures,

salinity gradients and the like. As a result of these activities he has, perhaps more than any other person interviewed, acquired a substantial knowledge of an estuarine system. He has also undertaken a substantive historical study of matters relating to the bar opening; but his long-time avocation of the need to address the overall ecological health of the entire estuary and its fish populations, matters upon which he depends to earn so much of his living, tend to fall upon deaf ears. Like several other interviewees, he feels that political expediency too often undermines environmental issues. He says the opening has been on the east side for the past three years as part of a five-year trial. The town lobby has not been content to see the trial through to its conclusion and successfully lobbied for a ministerial decision to end it and broach the bar on the west side. This change is expected to occur next time. Interestingly, several fishermen remarked that 1998 has produced the best season in memory for King George whiting. According to recent observations, another was also looking with feigned trepidation to a bumper season for crabs in 1998.

Despite the opposition, Owen is a patient man; and one with an irrepressible sense of humour. When I naively asked him, "How do you handle a cobbler?" he replied, "Oh, just grab him by the nose and hang on..." One suspects he has maintained this same philosophy over the years in pursuing environmental reform. Owen has his supporters, as is apparent in various interviews, but there is also a noticeable reluctance for these people to criticise others too directly. It is, after all a small community. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that another researcher Dr Jeremy Prince who looked into the bar issue a few years ago wrote that Owen's unpublished work on the sand bar was well deserving of academic recognition.⁹

Ray Smith drew particular attention to an apparent relationship between Wilson's Inlet and Shark Bay in the life-cycle of the pink snapper.¹⁰ Ray thought that these fish began life at Shark Bay, one of the places where the species spawns, and were then transported by the Leeuwin Current southwards. Many juveniles entered Wilson's Inlet where they grew and were exploited by fishermen, but eventually maturing fish left the estuary and moved back towards Shark Bay. Ray has fished professionally at both places and said large specimens taken on the south coast were usually in far superior condition to those taken in northern waters.

The dispute about the bar opening seems destined to continue, but neither were totally harmonious relationships apparent at Hardy Inlet, Augusta, where a distinct impression was gained from professional estuary fishermen that they are under increasing pressure from a vocal minority. They say professional fishermen have quietly operated since the 1920s and view the criticism as a comparatively recent, unwelcome trend. There is reportedly also a groundswell of diverse opinion in the region over other environmental conservation issues, particularly in relation to the impact of mining and forestry management upstream.

The number of professionals fishing Hardy Inlet is small, and there is a feeling amongst them that the belief of the recreational lobby and others that they take too many fish is largely

⁹ Prince, J. (ND). *A Desktop Study of Wilson Inlet*. Leederville: Biospherics Pty. Ltd. p.43

¹⁰ *Chrysophrys auratus*.

misinformed. Trevor Price said that when people have complained they can't catch fish because of professionals, he has invited them to go and catch the fish he will be getting tomorrow.

One of the most contentious and long running issues in Hardy Inlet has been associated with the netting of black bream. For net fishermen the best time to do this is in the winter time and professionals have in the past utilised as many as forty short nets projecting from the banks. This raised the ire of some amateurs, and in the vicinity of Molloy Island one professional fisherman in the past was allegedly subjected to a series of anonymous threats including setting fire to his unattended vehicle unless he ceased fishing in the area. According to Trevor Price, these threats had been sufficiently intimidating to encourage the person to leave the industry.

Amateurs have also participated in bream netting activities and at one time were so active that their activities were banned during the winter months when the species was most vulnerable, due to more turbid water. Allegedly the smaller mesh sizes which amateurs utilised resulted in a high mortality of juvenile bream. However, according to Barry Dawes, the closure to amateurs was intended to facilitate spawning, but said bream spawn later than the present closed season. Professional fisherman Paul Benson also thought bream spawned after winter, but has noticed that certain water conditions east of Albany appear at times to cause spawning fluctuations. In some years the fish may not spawn at all if conditions are not right, and sometimes there may be two spawnings in the one year. Kevin Benson remarked on a general decline of black bream in southern estuaries and thought it was associated with the introduction of superphosphates during the 1920s with group settlement schemes. He felt there may have been an effect on the viability of spawn.

Colin Price has no doubt that the black bream are under serious threat, to the extent that he now rarely sees one in Hardy Inlet. Colin netted some very large catches of this species in the past but in his view the reason for the decline may lie with the establishment of pine plantations upstream near Nannup, which apparently commenced twenty or so years ago. As with many fishermen interviewed for this project, Colin has assisted various scientific studies in the past, but like Barry Dawes, said there had been little feedback relating to Hardy Inlet fish. Colin was unaware of any continuity in scientific studies of any fish species in the estuary. I had the opportunity to accompany Kevin Price on a fishing trip in Hardy Inlet and noted that the areas where he worked were teeming with yellow-fin whiting and sea mullet. Kevin's strategy in finding fish involved looking for fresh marks on the bottom left by shoaling fish, a method also described in the past by Prince for fishers in Wilson's Inlet.¹¹ Kevin was able to determine whether the marks were recent, or several days old.

No recreational fishers were sighted and Kevin said most tended to fish in the waters closed to professionals, which are nearer to the river mouth. The very heavy haul net was used in mid-afternoon, and the bye-catch was negligible. Clearly a huge number of smaller fish which had been visible beforehand had escaped through the large mesh size used, which was as

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.62.

he had intended. Kevin said that he had been consistently fishing like this for many years. He adds value to his catch by filleting it and selling these to southwest retailers who have placed standing orders. The only fish he now sends to Perth are the winter-caught black bream. This is a situation quite different from when he first entered the industry when every possible fish was caught and freighted to Perth for auction.

While the auction system undoubtedly has a role to play for a long time to come, it seems that it has the capacity to encourage over-exploitation of fisheries. It is apparent in numerous transcripts that historically, fishermen who sent fish to auction could always be assured of some form of return, unless the consignment reached its destination in a state unfit for human consumption. Only if the price fell to a level which did not cover costs, would fishermen cease sending fish. It was this factor which ultimately persuaded Kevin to process and sell his catch locally, and in so doing he became obliged to self-regulate the size of his catches to a manageable quantity. The process is labour intensive and time consuming, but enables him to maintain his chosen lifestyle and at the same time conserve fish stocks. Of course the maintenance of such a situation is possibly dependent on the non-introduction of more efficient technology such as a filleting machine. Trevor developed a scaling machine and this significantly reduced the time formerly needed for that operation.

Alf Sharp also used to send his fish by rail from Wilson's Inlet to auction; in Melbourne no less, a journey which took at least three days, but with luck could bring better prices. Alf saw the relatively small consumer base in Perth as a problem in attaining higher prices, and lamented that there was consumer resistance to species such as pilchard and mullet. Interestingly Kevin Benson said that in the past, logistical problems meant occasionally as much as five days could elapse between the time fish was caught and the time it reached the market.

Over the years Kevin Price has observed various environmental changes, some with no obvious cause. So called "swan weed" declined ten or twelve years ago but is apparently now regenerating. This year he has seen more waterfowl on the estuary than for a long time. Similarly some fish put in sporadic appearances in large numbers, such as the King George whiting, but this species is usually absent in commercial quantities, being better known in the estuaries at Mandurah, Denmark, and Albany.

Kevin's father Colin provided another reason for filleting yellow-fin whiting. He said that if kept whole at un-iced temperatures the flesh of this species tends to turn yellowish, which is a marketing disadvantage. Apparently this was something which has always occurred with the species there.

Now retired, long time Augusta identity George "Pud" Challis has lived on the shore of the estuary since arriving with his group settler parents in the 1920s. He maintained that fish populations were as good as they had ever been, and were certainly under no threat now. A professional fisherman and former bulldozer owner who had cleared much of the Augusta region, George also said that the so called "spot weed" which appears from time to time and has been assumed to be connected with agricultural nutrient runoff, had been appearing in the

estuary periodically for as long as he could remember. Alf Sharp said that blue-green algae had periodically appeared in south coast estuaries over a very long time.

At the time of these interviews, and allegedly in response to persistent lobbying by a local tour boat operator, a dredge was deepening an artificial channel in Hardy Inlet and pumping the spoil into other parts of the estuary. The sterile silt from this was spreading out and covering fish feeding grounds. According to Kevin Price the professional fishermen were not consulted beforehand, and he had subsequently lost one of his best hauling grounds, which was now covered by an elevated island of spoil. He claimed that the dredging project had been poorly designed from the outset, and that the spoil was originally being dumped in a part of the estuary where it would be flushed back into the channel in the next flood. He said he advised the operators of this and they have eventually revised their plan. In contrast to Molloy Island, nearby Augusta has experienced intensive development of luxury housing near the inlet mouth and the arrival of persons with apparently conflicting environmental perspectives.

Failure of government departments to take advantage of extant local knowledge was a persistent theme echoed by fishermen along the entire south coast when questioned about changes to the environment over time. Alf Smith whose family can now boast five generations of professional fishermen on Wilson's Inlet, pointedly remarked that with a hundred years of family experience fishing those waters they had an intimate understanding of the resource which has provided their livelihood for so long. Alf felt that professional fishermen were not about to jeopardise this resource and were well able to manage their own activities. He and his wife May live in retirement on a farm they created on a picturesque part of the estuary. For them Wilson's Inlet is akin to a sacred place. May, the daughter of a Mandurah fisherman, reveals how important was the role of a fishing wife in times of economic depression, and provides a glimpse of how lonely it could be for a young woman living in an isolated location in those pioneering times.

The valuable role of the fishing wife is undoubted, and one suspects, to a degree unrecognised. May left her fishing family in Mandurah to hew out a home with young Alf in the bush at Denmark and says she wept for several months as the realisation of what she had taken on overcame her. The economic depression meant that returns from fish sent to distant Perth were low, and to make ends meet the couple cut firewood for the butter factory and fence posts for the local farmers. Potato digging with bare hands, so as not to mark the tubers for a fastidious marketplace was another source of income, and May's account of the local parson coming across them at their labours and then admonishing them for doing such work on a Sunday reveals that for the young couple, the pressures they had to overcome were not only economic. Probably the younger fisherman's wife today is no less special, as she too copes with her man being absent for long hours in order to bring home an uncertain pay packet.

Nevertheless, life ran at a different pace in the past, and no doubt many would lament for those times when the local train crew, who collected the Smith's fish, could afford to stop the train for a half hour while everyone on board struggled to release a horse trapped in a bog.

Retired fisherman, Les Mouchemore in Albany felt that these days there was less of an

inclination for fishery researchers to listen to the voice of experience. Les provides a harrowing description of how in the past numerous industries polluted Princess Royal Harbour with impunity, but says one of the greatest causes of damage to seagrass beds was silting from poorly planned dredging operations.

Many of these elderly fishermen interviewed have noted ecological change, but also have noted the dynamism of the estuarine environments. High productivity of fisheries is cyclic, and the indicators of whether or not an estuary is in good health apparently have long been present. For example George Ebbet over several years has observed the decline and recovery of *Ruppia* seagrass in Wilson's Inlet through apparent natural processes. Alf Sharp said the appearance of *Ruppia* there in the 1970s coincided with the proliferation of cobbler. Les Mouchemore thought that the cyclic dynamics of seagrass and algae were better understood by fishermen than the scientists.

Hardship endured, is a theme which emerges in the early experiences of almost every fisher interviewed, and yet this hardship seems to have been one of the very factors which has contributed to the great character of this group of people. In fact they do not actually complain about hardships, and invariably they are proud that they have been able to lead such independent lives. The richness that they may not have acquired in monetary terms has generally been compensated by this independence and the richness of lifestyle.

More often than not the dwellings of the very oldest generations of fishermen are located in such idyllic places that eager real-estate agents now pound a path to their doorways pleading almost on bended knees for them to sell. Money however is not on the minds of these folk as much as the desire to preserve their lifestyle. It is the threat to that independence they all most fear. The licence buyback scheme offered by the Fisheries Department might be considered by some to be generous, but for the older fishermen who have spent a lifetime on the estuaries and who eventually part with their licence, it can be a depressing wrench. For them there may be few equals to the rich experience of boating over a mirror-calm south-coast estuary in the waking hours of a summer morning and pulling a set-net in to recover a good haul of fish.

But there were the rough mornings too, because most of the fishermen and women interviewed have fished the year round. One can only admire the tenacious courage required to leave a soft, warm bed before sunrise when there is a howling southern-winter storm lashing away. The weathered faces of many of these fishers bear mute testimony to difficult times endured in the past.

Then there was the second world war, that passage of history in Western Australia which is still barely understood by the greater populace. The efforts of the Soulos family have already been mentioned, and in Denmark, Alf Smith and other fishermen also contributed to the war-effort by staying at their occupations; but they also watched over the waterways, and bore arms with the Civil Defence Corps. Some fishers did go away to war too, and some returned, but there is the suspicion that like so many other Australian men who survived the trauma of war, survival at home for some could be no less formidable.

Of interest too was people's spirituality in relation to fishing activities, and invariably

Blessing of the Fleet ceremonies were cited as one example of religious expression. The response to the subject was mixed. While no hostility was ever directed at myself for raising the subject, negative, sometimes sectarian views emerged from some people. Others felt that they did indeed have a personal spiritual relationship with the aquatic environment, but this was an inner matter for them. A third category of people were actively involved with various Blessings of the Fleet, and saw them as a means of enriching theirs and the lives of others in the fishing community. These ceremonies are increasingly multi denominational, and as an annual event are much looked forward to by the participants.

There is a wealth of other information not covered in this report which can be found in the transcripts of interviews. No doubt many of the subjects mentioned can be explored in greater depth and other researchers are invited to take up the challenge.

Without exception I always found all interviewees to be gentle and obliging hosts. It has been a privilege to record something of their interesting lives for future generations, and I sincerely thank them all.

13. Aboriginal estuarine fishers

At the outset of the project, an information package was sent to all Aboriginal organisations listed for the southwest. The response was disappointing, with no replies received.

The ethnohistorical record shows that in the past, estuarine fishing along the south coast was important for Aborigines, with significant records existing for Oyster Harbour and Wilson's Inlet. Furthermore, the remains of more than forty stone fishtrap arrangements exist on the tidal flats of several estuaries along the southern coast, with conspicuous arrays located at Oyster Harbour, Wilson's Inlet and Broke Inlet.¹² These structures have attracted considerable interest since the Vancouver expedition's visit in 1791, but no reliable descriptions of Aborigines actually using them in the post-settlement period have been identified.

The fishtraps at Oyster Harbour were visited by myself in January 1998 during the first round of interviews, and by good fortune I met an Aboriginal family visiting from Gnowangerup who were gathering mussels from adjacent rocks. These were to be used that evening for a shoreside fishing expedition for black-bream in the nearby Kalgan River. The woman, her husband and their two sons also occasionally fished from a dinghy in Oyster Harbour, and always used bait they had foraged from the estuarine shoreline environment. The family did not have a customary relationship with the immediate region. Although the 35 year old mother had lived as a child in nearby Albany, she had not known of the fishtraps until she learned about them in a high school class. Her now deceased grandmother had apparently much more knowledge of traditional Aboriginal activities in the Albany region, and the woman

¹² Dix, W.C. and Meagher, S.J. (1976). Fish traps in the south-west of Western Australia. *Rec. West. Aust. Mus.*, 1976, 4. pp. 171-188.

Weaver, P. (1997) Maritime resource exploitation in southwest Australia prior to 1901. (Unpublished PhD thesis.) Perth: Edith Cowan University.

regretted that she had not taken greater notice of these matters when she was a child.

While the family were willing to discuss their current activities, for the purposes of this project they preferred to remain anonymous. Nor did they wish to participate in a recorded interview. This reticence was due to the fact that they did not consider themselves sufficiently authoritative to participate formally in the project. Had they done so they might have caused offence to other Aborigines living in the region. It is a situation familiar to any anthropological worker who has operated within Aboriginal Australia. The effective establishment of informative relationships with Aboriginal people can necessitate a great deal of time and preliminary personal contact. Over time many authoritative Aboriginal people have undergone a "fish bowl" experience through a great number of short term visits from officials or researchers requiring some sort of information, trivial or otherwise, and often there is little perceived return.

In the light of the continuing post-Mabo debate over land claims it is probable that reticence and increased caution about statements relating to fishing experience are linked. The entire south coast extending from the vicinity of Margaret River to Israelite Bay at the head of the Great Australian Bight and encompassing all south coast estuaries has been subjected to an ambit claim (WC 96/109) for native title by a group of Nyungar families. This was accepted for lodgement with the Native Title Tribunal on 2 January 1997 and a circular sent to professional fishermen by the Tribunal inviting them to register their own case. Other claims for areas along the coast have been lodged and examples are listed below:

Wheelman claim east of Esperance WC 96/85

Bullen claim in Esperance region WC 96/64

Bullen claim, ditto WC 96/33

It is possible that a future oral history project specifically focussed to record Aboriginal views about fishing in the southwest could be more productive.

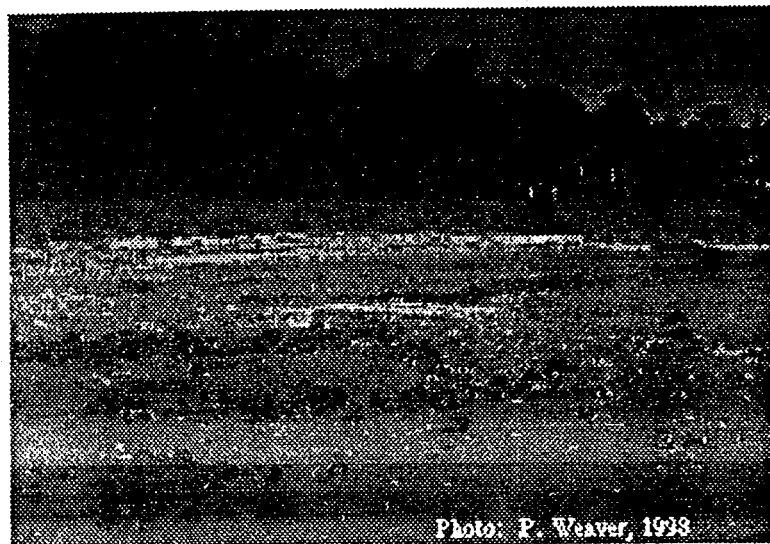


Photo: P. Weaver, 1998

A prehistoric Aboriginal fishtrap at Oyster Harbour

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15a. Oral histories of fishing on Ningaloo Reef, and South coast estuaries

During 1997-98 two oral history projects, one involving fishing on the Ningaloo Reef System, and the other involving estuarine fisheries east of Cape Leeuwin are being undertaken by an independent researcher from Edith Cowan University, acting under joint sponsorship of the Commonwealth National Fishcare Program, the Western Australian Fisheries Department's Fishcare Program, and the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management.

If you have regularly fished either of the above regions over a long period of time you probably have some historically valuable stories to put on record for future generations. There are many matters of interest. For example, how did you learn to fish? Has fishing had an important effect on your life? Has the way you have traditionally fished been diminished? Can others learn from your experience?

It is important to tell those in the future what it was like for you. Interviews should take an hour or so, and can be done on confidential basis if required. The researcher is PAUL WEAVER, who has fished by various methods in WA waters since he was a kid in the 1950s.

Interviews finish in April 1998, so there is a need to hear from participants as soon as possible to allow for regional scheduling of visits.

If you consider you have a long standing knowledge of fishing activity in either of the above regions Paul would like to hear from you, and to make arrangements to record your unique story for posterity. Please fill in the form as appropriate and send it post-free to:

**Reply Paid M8
FISHING HISTORY PROJECT
23 Waddell Rd.
Palmyra. WA. 6157**

Your name Age.....
Address.....
.....
Post code.....
Telephone (....) Best phone contact time.....
Which region? Ningaloo South coast estuaries Which
estuaries?.....
Roughly what year did your fishing activity in the region begin?.....
How many years have you fished in that particular region?.....
Do you still fish there?

Please estimate how many times you fish in that region each year?.....
Reason for fishing? Professional Recreational Other?
.....
What species do you like to catch?.....
Tick favourite methods? Net? Rod or hand Line? Spearfishing? Dynamite?
From shore? From boat? Night? Day?
Have you noticed any significant changes to your catch success over time?.....
Have you observed any significant changes to the fishing environment over time?.....

Please jot down on the back of this form some information about your fishing experience in the region.

Feel free to copy this form and pass it to others



15b.

Oral history of Ningaloo and South coast estuaries

Consent form¹³

This form is an agreement confirming that you (the informant) have given permission for Paul Weaver (the interviewer) of Edith Cowan University to record an interview with you and use it in an oral history of Ningaloo and/or south coast estuaries. Clause 4 allows him to place the record of interview and its transcript in an archive when the project is completed.

1. The informant hereby agrees to an interview, and to a sound recording being made by him of the interview called, 'the record of interview.'
2. The informant shall have the right to hear the full record of interview and to place restrictions upon its use or access to the whole or any part of that record of interview, or to require any part to be destroyed PROVIDED THAT the informant shall give written details before conclusion of the project in June 1998.
3. Subject to any restrictions under clause 2 the interviewer shall have non-exclusive licence in relation to the contents of record of interview to:
 - a) compile an index thereof:
 - b) edit; and
 - c) reproduce an edited version for the purpose of conservation, loan, sale or publication.
4. The informant gives permission for a copy of the recording and/or transcript to be lodged in an public archive for access by other researchers. (Strike out if permission is not given)
5. Copyright in the interview shall belong to the informant. Copyright in the sound recording shall belong to the interviewer.

Signature.....Date.....

Your name (print).....Age.....

Address.....

Post code.....

Telephone (.....)

Contact address

Reply Paid M8
FISHING HISTORY PROJECT
23 Waddell Rd.
Palmyra. WA. 6157

¹³ The legal format is taken from an example published by The Oral History Association of Australia. See Banki, P. (1980). "Copyright and oral historians", *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 2. 42-43.

16.

An oral history of Fishing on South Coast Estuaries

Transcripts

Dr Paul R. Weaver
Edith Cowan University
August 1998

Sponsored by
Commonwealth National Fishcare Program, Fisheries WA and the Western Australian
Department of Conservation and Land Management

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